BALFOUR AND FOREIGN POLICY

The international thought of a Conservative statesman

JASON TOMES

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Introduction

This is a study of the foreign policy views of Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930), sometime British Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, and Leader of the Conservative Party. It examines his understanding of international relations, his perception of contemporary foreign and Imperial affairs, and his prescriptions for British policy. It thus spans international thought, diplomatic history, and biography. Theory is not divorced from practice, still less practice from people.

There exist five posthumous biographies of Balfour.[1] The best overall coverage of foreign policy is to be found in the first, notwithstanding that it was published in 1936 and written by his devoted niece. Blanche Dugdale was conscientious and well informed. She was also a woman of strong convictions, a fervid Zionist, and a stalwart of the League of Nations Union. (Balfour kept his real opinion of the LNU from her for fear that she would burst into tears.)[2] Her interpretation set the tone for her successors. Two further works, on Balfour and the British Empire, are of limited scope and depth.[3]

Balfour was once described as the Cyrano de Bergerac of British foreign policy – 'celui qui souffle et qu'on oublie.'[4] He does feature in all the diplomatic histories of the period, but rarely as a focus

[1] Blanche Dugdale *Arthur James Balfour* (London 1936); K. Young *Arthur James Balfour* (London 1963); S.H. Zebel *Balfour* (Cambridge 1973); M. Egremont *Balfour* (London 1980); R. Mackay *Balfour* (Oxford 1985).

[2] N.A. Rose (ed.) *'Baffy'* (London 1973) pp. xvi and xix; Balfour to Cecil, 4 June 1923, Cecil Papers 51071A f. 89.

[3] H.E. Bärtschi *Die Entwicklung vom Imperialistischen Reichsgedanken zur modernen Idee des Commonwealths im Lebenswerk Lord Balfours* (Aarau 1957); D. Judd *Balfour and the British Empire* (London 1968). There is also C.B. Shannon *Arthur J. Balfour and Ireland 1874–1922* (Washington 1988).

[4] A.L. Kennedy *Old Diplomacy and New 1876–1922* (London 1922) p. 365.

of attention. A wide and generous scattering of passing references is the norm. This reflects his status. He was long a British policy-maker of undoubted prominence. He was never *the* British policy-maker of acknowledged dominance. If Salisbury, Grey, and Lloyd George might be said to have topped the bill, Balfour has a strong claim to head the supporting cast. The comparative brevity of his premiership and tenure of the Foreign Office belies the magnitude of his involvement. For forty-odd years he belonged to the inner circle of politicians who mattered, and his views were respected to the extent that he came to be regarded as an authority on international affairs. He is in consequence a significant statesman from momentous times.

The years 1890–1930 witnessed the zenith of the British Empire. Never was there more red on the map. The British people had grown fully conscious of their global leadership. Yet this very awareness was due in part to the intensification of international rivalry. The culmination of four centuries of Western imperialism was a situation in which no Great Power could extend its interests without interfering with those of another. The modernisation of Russia appeared to endanger British India. Germany had attained pre-eminence in Europe and aspired to more. There was still the possibility of France becoming overambitious. Japan was embarking on expansion in the Far East. Great wealth and growing foreign trade made the United States of America a potential force throughout the world. The weakness of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Manchu Empires created persistent instability. Then a war of unprecedented scale convulsed the whole international system, accelerating technological and political change, and spawning a new ideological challenge in the form of Bolshevism.

The proliferation of threats and the advancement of modern weaponry caused the costs of defending the British Empire to spiral, while the relative strength of the British economy declined. Defence expenditure was further restricted by rising popular demand for social provision. Thus developments at home and abroad combined to straiten external policy. Government ministers faced increasingly difficult choices, while theorists pursued long-term solutions down the divergent paths of internationalism and autarky. British ascendancy in world affairs, consolidated after the Napoleonic Wars, was less and less to be taken for granted. With hindsight, we know it was already on the wane.

The factors which determine the changing role of one nation in relation to others are exceedingly multifarious: geographical, diplomatic, military, industrial, agricultural, financial, commercial, technological, educational, intellectual, moral, religious, ideological, institutional, party political, biographical, etc. Of the writing of books there is no end, and this one may seem at first sight a negligible addition to the monstrous pile. Let it however be said, without contradiction, that this is a book at once narrow and broad. It is narrow in that it elucidates the mind of a single man, who, though influential for a time, was no 'world historical figure'. It is broad in that, in so doing, it touches on most of the major issues of four decades of international history and some of the fundamental questions of international relations.

The human world is too complex for its politics to be understood fully by anybody, but practical statesmen need at some level to try and make sense of the muddle. This book is an examination of how one did. People respond to situations as they see them. Their images of reality are coloured by their preconceptions and customary patterns of thinking. Even though the connection between political thought and political action cannot be established with certainty, a key to the explanation of British policy is surely provided by the way its makers perceived the world.

The thinking of this particular policy-maker was unusually profound and coherent, moreover, for it rested on a deliberate philosophical basis. It was also distinctively conservative. Should some of his ideas be found to possess inherent interest, so much the better.

The high appraisal of Balfour's political thought given here may possibly surprise some readers acquainted with previous books about him. It is worth considering why.

By general admission, Balfour was an intellectual. A great many learned societies welcomed him on account of his political standing, but his participation in several was real and his presence seldom incongruous. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, of course, and President of the British Academy. In private life, too, he enjoyed the company of eminent scholars and scientists. Philosophy was his discipline, and he wrote it in earnest throughout his life. *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt* (1879), *The Foundations of Belief* (1895), *Theism and Humanism* (1915), and *Theism and Thought* (1923) are proof of his capacity for sustained

abstract thought and of the importance which he attached to it.

Is he then an acclaimed political thinker in the history of British Conservatism? He is not. The subject-matter of his philosophical treatises was never explicitly political. The speculative mind which very publicly pondered the bases of theology, science, aesthetics, ethics, and even economics was rarely observed to venture near the theory of politics. Thus little was revealed of the political thought of an otherwise notably thoughtful person. It remained unclear how his intellectual life related to his politics at all.

Biographers have dodged the question – because Balfour dodged it himself. He generally chose to give formal expression to his opinions either at an abstruse philosophical level or else at a practical political one. What kind of thinking he used to link the two levels (if any) was never set out in a treatise-cum-memo or explained in a lecture-cum-speech. On this point, indeed, the enquiries of Mrs Dugdale elicited only banter. When she asked for the essence of Toryism, he answered, 'to do what seems to be the right thing in a given case'. He declined her request for guiding principles in politics, saying, 'the more effort has been made to produce those abstract rules, – the greater has been the confusion and controversy'.[5]

Are we then to assume that Balfour was devoid of serious political ideas? Elsewhere he suggested that the highest success in politics required a power of dealing both with principles and with practical problems.[6]

'The last of the Athenians', Baldwin called him. 'The philosopher of statecraft and the statesman of philosophy' was another graceful epitaph.[7] His most eulogistic biographer – Kenneth Young – likewise itches to hail a philosopher-statesman, but a philosopher *and* a statesman is all he manages to show.[8]

There has consequently been a tendency to dismiss the philosophical side of Balfour as a dilettante irrelevance. Worldly-wise political historians, unimpressed by his donnish airs and graces, have stripped the statesman down to an adaptable executive

[5] Dugdale *Balfour* vol. II pp. 404–5.

[6] A.J. Balfour *Essays and Addresses* 3rd edn. (Edinburgh 1905) p. 220.

[7] Ian Malcolm *Lord Balfour* (London 1930) p. 123.

[8] Young *Balfour* pp. 59–60 and 155–6. Young deserves credit for at least paying due attention to the philosophical work of Balfour and wondering how it fitted in with his politics, even if he lacks substantial answers. The biography by Mackay, sub-titled *Intellectual Statesman*, is not especially concerned with Balfour's thinking.

politician of rather colourless aspect. The power of his intellect is acknowledged with reference only to points of style and technique: lucidity, logic, critical subtlety, cold calculation, and an incurable habit of seeing both sides of a question.

This interpretation fails to solve the puzzle. If Balfour were simply a smooth political operator, what can explain his stubbornness in respect of Ireland and Zionism? These are precisely the issues most often associated with him. Was he a pragmatic placeholder with streaks of unaccountable obstinacy? Such an estimate is likely to satisfy only those who routinely take the view that Conservatives, no matter how cerebral, have nothing to offer but expedients and prejudices.

Alan Taylor described the 'detestable' Balfour as *both* 'cynical, unprincipled, and frivolous' *and* 'that rare thing in politics, an intellectual extremist'.[9] It appears that neither admirers nor detractors have presented an integrated view.

This study insists on seeing Balfour whole – as a deep-thinking politician with effective principles. He did not offer them up on a plate, but, when they are sought out and pieced together, his approach to international relations demonstrates a continuity of belief and application from his formal philosophical writings to his actual political practice.

The scheme of this book will naturally not commend itself to everyone. Some analysts discount the role played by politicians in history, which they prefer to explain purely in terms of impersonal forces. British foreign policy is to them a function of the economic and strategic position of the nation. This doctrine, in its extreme form, is surely to be set aside with the metaphysics of determinism. To commonsense observers it is evident that the personal element cannot be altogether excluded. The broad lines of national development set the parameters of feasible policy. Within them, political leaders make choices which are not intrinsically less 'free' than those of everybody else.

This conceded, policy-makers may yet be studied primarily as products of their environment. Some historians fasten on social and cultural influences. They trace the reactions and reasoning of British statesmen of this period to class consciousness, the public school ethos, *fin de siècle* pessimism, and so on. This kind of general-

[9] A.J.P. Taylor *From the Boer War to the Cold War* (London 1995) pp. 55 and 57.

isation may be useful and informative within its proper limits. Balfour did himself display many attributes of the stereotype: 'a cool, detached view of politics, a global perspective, a distaste for mere trade, for the *nouveaux riches*, and for foreign governments which did not follow the gentlemanly code'.[10] He has been called 'the best example in modern British history of the aristocrat in public life' and even 'a typical product of the Eton incubator'.[11] His manners were indeed aristocratic – the more so, perhaps, because he was not quite a fully-fledged aristocrat. ('Odd how the middle class blood will out', observed a disparaging titled relative.[12]) Scrutinise the alleged embodiment of a human type and idiosyncrasy is certain to be discovered. This country landowner was happier on a bicycle than on a horse. Public school left him with a *dislike* of team games and classics. He grew up in the second third of the nineteenth century, but felt no partiality for it in retrospect. In literature, his favourite was Jane Austen. In music, his idol was Handel. He said that the intellectual celebrities of his youth – Mill, Carlyle, Comte, and Newman – failed to arouse his enthusiasm.[13] If individual tastes cannot be inferred with confidence from the facts of class and generation, still less can a detailed correlation with individual views on national priorities and the world order be constructed. This book does not purport to characterise the outlook of a representative specimen.

Other historians concentrate on connecting the words and deeds of statesmen to the political situations in which they worked. Tactical manoeuvres within and between parties and departments are the centre of interest. Successful politicians are assumed to profess whatever opinions they need to profess in order to remain successful – and personal conviction is a redundant concept. This postulate raises difficult questions about belief and communication with implications beyond the practice of professional politicians. How are 'real' independent opinions to be distinguished from 'artificial' instrumental ones? Is there any meaningful distinction? Are ulterior motives universal? What is denoted by integrity? This is not the place to attempt answers. Adherents

[10] P.M. Kennedy *The Realities behind Diplomacy* (London 1981) p. 60.
[11] Sir Arthur Salter *Personality in Politics* (London 1948) p. 25; L. Mosley *Curzon* (London 1961) p. 204.
[12] Lady Robert Cecil, cited in K. Rose *The Later Cecils* (New York 1975) p. 136.
[13] A.J. Balfour *The Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge 1900) p. 12.

of the tactical mode of analysis may be able to interpret the contents of this book in accordance with their assumptions, but they will observe that it is not written with these in mind. The author takes the view that (i) some expressed beliefs are clearly more instrumental than others, and (ii) that the preponderance of Balfour's expressed beliefs about foreign policy is rather less so (in relation to the norms of high-level politics in general). This is not at all to deny that the pursuit of power plays a large part in political life or to doubt that the expectations of supporters constrain leaders. It is simply to suggest that such considerations do not apply with equal force to all politicians and all kinds of political activity.

Balfour never cultivated a close personal following. Founding his career on family patronage, he sustained it by holding himself a little above the fray and impressing people with his superiority. Every strategy imposes its own restrictions, but this most self-conscious of power-brokers did not sacrifice his individuality. His partisan and factional operations were marked by exceptional ingenuity – and a detachment so obvious as to be a serious political weakness. Colleagues and constituents admired his skill and appreciated his condescension. They did not understand him. His successor, Bonar Law, heard that Balfour thought it 'an advantage to have a leader who was not intellectually much superior to the rest of the party he led'.[14] A politician so aloof was quite capable of manufacturing expressions of belief to advance his cause while all the time retaining and developing his own views. Behind this facade there was a building. Balfour did think for himself – and judged when it was appropriate to impart his thoughts.

Foreign affairs are remote by definition. Balfour believed that they were best considered on their own terms at a remove from domestic political contests. This was an ideal, unrealisable even by himself, but the belief was widely held in governing circles. Thus, while party considerations inevitably continued to play a part in the framing of public speeches on foreign policy, many major issues were simply not seriously addressed in public speeches. Parliamentary involvement was often superficial as a result. Given that foreign affairs were not usually a continuous factor in internal Cabinet politics either, the policy-making pro-

[14] Thomas Jones *Whitehall Diary 1916–1925* ed. K. Middlemas (London 1969) vol. 1 p. 222.

cess did preserve a considerable degree of autonomy from outside pressures.[15] Within the policy-making coterie, there was consequently significant scope for the expression of personal conviction.

Thus it is possible to derive from what Balfour wrote, and what others with direct knowledge wrote about him, a collection of opinions on external policy which is not a mere rag bag of instrumental remarks but amounts to a body of practical thought. The consistency of his approach points to a system, indeed, though it would be inappropriate to attempt a schematic exposition of it. That he ever formulated such a thing in his own mind is doubtful, and no one can now construct one in his name.

Even far less ambitious inferences are open to fundamental objection. How *dare* anyone presume to draw conclusions about the outlook of another person on the basis of incomplete material which cannot always be taken at face value? And yet everyone does. It is by such imperfect means that social relations between human beings are doomed to operate. All we can know of what other people think is gleaned from what they say and do. Insofar as we impute beliefs and desires to the living, we can with equal justification impute them to those who once lived. Only two essential points distinguish the latter procedure: there is no chance of our obtaining additional information at will by creating test situations, and we can publish our interpretation without fear of contradiction at first-hand.

There was a time when dead British statesmen were routinely granted a generous measure of indulgence by historians of their own nationality. This excessive respect for persons bred an understandable reaction. It can seem as if only political leaders of superhuman perception could satisfy some latter-day critics. It is all too easy to forget that historical figures were real people to whom justice should be done. A marginal amount of unconscious misrepresentation yet remains unavoidable. Balfour once said: 'I am sure I am always more or less happy when I am being praised, and not very uncomfortable when I am being abused; but I have moments of uneasiness when I am being explained.'[16] He was addressing the Parliamentary Press Gallery at the time, so it is uncertain

[15] Kennedy *Realities behind Diplomacy* pp. 50 and 59.
[16] A.J. Balfour *Opinions and Argument* (London 1927) p. 44.

what caused him the sharper unease: explanation that was wide of the mark or explanation that was spot on.

The modern historian is better placed than the average Edwardian journalist to produce an accurate interpretation. He has access to virtually all official papers and a significant amount of correspondence. Balfour could normally draw up a Cabinet memorandum on foreign policy without radical pretence, and the frankness of his letters naturally varied according to his relation to the recipient.

This study relies on these private sources, but does not ignore public statements. To assess the full range of Balfour's international ideas requires a full range of material. Many of his books, essays, and addresses on topics more or less remote from current affairs yet have a bearing on the larger questions of politics. They help counteract the inevitable bias of ministerial documents towards emphasis on short-term executive thinking. No autobiography exists to clarify or cloud the picture – a posthumous fragment, written for financial reasons at the age of eighty, is impersonal almost to the point of uselessness.[17] Extensive transcripts from a life-time of speech-making are available in *Hansard* and the press. Balfour's speeches, almost invariably all his own work, were usually extemporised from notes scrawled on the back of an envelope, which meant both a halting delivery and a refreshing absence of polished rhetoric. The constraints on him were many and often obvious. He is not to be found gratuitously threatening the unity of his party, his country, or the Empire, or giving needless offence to foreign governments, or outraging popular sensibilities. International affairs received especially bland and careful treatment. Parliamentary and platform speeches nevertheless contain suggestive and characteristic touches, be they general ideas or telling phrases, which illustrate the mind of their creator. The same may be said to a lesser extent of diplomatic notes drafted by Balfour.

All documents need to be considered critically in their context and in conjunction with other material. Where there is evidence that Balfour was saying something which he did not believe, his statement is discounted. Where there are specific grounds for suspecting that he was doing so, those grounds are indicated. Elsewhere, his sincerity is left unchallenged. Any attempt to delineate

[17] A.J. Balfour *Chapters of Autobiography* (London 1930).

with greater precision than this the balance between political pressure and personal inclination in the formation of an expressed opinion would be a questionable undertaking at best. Let him speculate who will. In so much the historian has to use his judgment, but ultimately his readers must exercise their own.